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SUBJECT: KUWAITI GOVERNMENT BEGINS TO PRESS PARLIAMENT ON GRANTING VOTING RIGHT TO WOMEN

REF: KUWAIT 405

1. If Kuwait's senior leaders have their way, Kuwaiti women soon will have the right to join men at the ballot box. The GOK asked the National Assembly on February 20 to hold a special session to debate a draft law granting women the right to vote, pending since May 2004. This move comes four days after ten MPs filed a motion to refer the election law to the constitutional court on the grounds that Article 1, which grants voting rights only to men at least 21 years old, is unconstitutional. The GOK seeks to avert a parliamentary vote on the MPs' motion by advocating action on the draft bill. Some MPs fear a court ruling of 'unconstitutional' would result in the dissolution of the Government, a claim the GOK denies.

2. The MPs' motion seems to have reinvigorated GOK efforts to expand voting rights. While the Council of Ministers approved the draft law in May 2004, it has languished in Parliament's Interior and Defense Committee, a requisite step before the full Assembly can vote on it. Senior MPs have repeatedly told Embosfs that the GOK would have to press the Parliament to act. Shaykh Nasser Sabah Al-Sabah, special advisor to the Crown Prince, declared in an Arab Times editorial that Kuwait "should not be an anachronism and abnormality among Islamic and Arab countries" and that "democracy will be incomplete if one half of the people are excluded from (elections)." Shaykh Nasser is the eldest son of the Prime Minister, a vocal advocate for women's political rights.

3. Meanwhile, Social Affairs and Labor Minister Faisal Al-Hajji urged lawmakers to pass the bill in the current parliamentary term that concludes in June. Passage requires a simple majority of the 65 MPs and Ministers. The 13-member Islamist bloc and a number of tribal MPs are expected to oppose this effort to grant the vote to women. However, the fledgling Islamist Ummah Party (reftel), a Salafi-sponsored group with three backers in the Parliament but not recognized by the GOK, announced its support for full women's rights on February 21. The group of ten proponents of a constitutional court review (including former speaker Ahmed Abdul Aziz Saadoun, Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Mohammed Al-Sager, Youssef Al-Zalzalah, Hassan Jowhar, Abdul Wahab Al-Haroun and Ali Al-Rashid) represent liberal, independent and Shi'a MPs. At least seven additional MPs also support female suffrage.

4. Comment: With the exception of Justice Minister Ahmad Baqr who previously voted against women's suffrage, the GOK has vocally supported granting political rights to women but has done little to seek legislation of these rights. Change, however, may be afoot. The realization that it has a terrorist problem may push the GOK to support real change in order to counter Islamist radicals, whom it now increasingly views as a threat, rather than a potential ally to be co-opted. At the same time, liberals who have long supported political rights for women may take advantage of an opportune moment to press hard on these issues. End comment.

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